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The Romantic Paperback Chase

By Michael Kernan

Her cheeks still glistened from the tears she had shed, but gold sparks were flashing defiantly from her eyes.

Janet Dailey gets up at 4 in the morning, plugs in the coffeemaker and sits down at the electric typewriter in her bullet-shaped silver trailer. She writes until she has finished 11 pages, and that's it. That's her working day. Five days a week, 160 days a year.

Every 16 days she turns over a completed novel to her husband Bill, and he proofreads it, checks it for factual errors and calls up the nearest typist to retype it. Then the manuscript goes off to Harlequin Books.

Harlequin Books publishes 12 paperback romances a month. They sell for 95 cents to \$1.25, and you find them in bookstores, drugstores, newspaper stands and supermarkets all over the world. Average author's royalties are 10 per cent.

So far Janet Dailey has sold 24 million copies of her 28 novels.

There was a curious glint in his dark eyes when he glanced briefly at Colter, but it was gone when he directed his warm brown gaze at Natalie.

"What do we do the other 205 days of the year?" An expansive wave. "Anything we want. See the sights, travel around, read, watch TV. We love it."

They have been on the road for 3½ years. There are two TV sets in the trailer and a German shepherd named Dreist who chases his tail for exercise and wears little boots to protect the leather upholstery.

"So far we've done books located in 24 of the states," said Bill. "Our goal is to do all 50. She just started another one this morning. The 32d. Usually we run a couple of months behind the place we're actually staying in."

Harlequin Books, which is based in Toronto, has 140 writers turning out romantic novels. They are all women

and they all live in the United Kingdom except Janet Dailey. So far 2,000 titles have been published, and some readers own them all.

The blazing topaz flames in her eyes sputtered and died, her bravado fading . . . The cutting edge of his diamond gaze slashed away the attempt of her lips to form a protest.

"People's eyes tell you a lot," the 33-year-old writer said. "I have to work so hard to come up with the right descriptions of that eye contact."

Once she had a blind heroine and went around San Francisco for two days and nights with her eyes taped to get the feel of it.

"I had to use the other senses all through the book. Like fog and sea air smell very different. You get a whole new set of perceptions."

She learned the Harlequin formula by reading dozens of the books: no premarital sex, no violence, no political overtones, no unspoken gothic threats. The heroines nearly always work for a living and are of independent mind but not spectacularly liberated. They always get married in the end.

Poisonous gold flecks sprang into her eyes as she met his unrelenting gaze.

Their story is right out of a Harlequin. She was going to teletype school in Omaha in 1966. Hated it. Dropped into a drugstore for coffee and got to talking with this redheaded construction company owner.

"We had a job open in our office," said Bill Dailey, now 48. "So she worked for me. We didn't start dating right off."

"He called me Sam," she said. "Finally I asked him why, and he told me, 'So I won't have to marry you.'"

That's when I knew I had him hooked."

His goal at the time was to retire at 45, and he did just that. They took to the road before her success as a writer.

"She was always reading these novels, and she kept saying she could do better than that. So I told her, 'Do It.'"

The first novel took her a year, in her spare time from her job. It was called "No Quarter Asked" and it sold 800,000 copies the first year.

The mocking light in his blue-green eyes subtly reminded her of her rash statement . . .

Bill Dailey, a Texan who came up the hard way as a builder for roadshows and small circuses, is Jan's researcher. Every place they go, he takes notes on flora and fauna, local history and traditions, eating habits and so on. He and the typist are the only people who see a book before the publisher, for Jan herself never rewrites or even so much as glances at a finished manuscript.

"I never outline anything either," she added. "It's all in my head. I just imagine the main characters and the conflicts come up automatically. This one I'm doing now is about a couple who meet nine years after they were involved in a forced marriage and separated. I've had a yen to write since grade school. And I read a lot. I read everything, sometimes serious stuff sometimes just for entertainment."

Some characters become special favorites and appear in several books, but others she forgets.

The Daileys travel slowly. This summer they've been in New England (her current book is sited in Maine), and now, with the fall, they are heading gradually south and west to Texas, where they will winter.

"We love it this way," she said. "It's a simple life, and we can wear what we want and eat out when we want—he's the cook when we eat in, he's better than I am . . . and the people we meet are so friendly."

Especially the Harlequin readers. They don't have to be told who Janet Dailey is.

(Quotations from "Fiesta San Antonio" by Janet Dailey, Harlequin Books, 1977.)